

PLAY IT AGAIN

The Philip Morris recall

In late May 1995 Philip Morris issued a nationwide recall of many of its cigarette brands in the United States because of contamination from the chemical methyl isothiocyanate (MITC). A news article on this unprecedented event appears on pages 215-217. But a good understanding of this fascinating story can be gleaned from individual quotes about the recall published in press articles and press releases. These statements capture the many ironies in the story, and reveal much about the behaviour and attitudes of the many actors in the drama. So below we have dedicated an expanded Play It Again column to comments about the recall from the industry, smokers, vendors, the media, investment analysts, and the health community. — ED

The industry – opening remarks

“Philip Morris USA is voluntarily initiating a pre-emptive and precautionary recall of a number of its cigarette brand packings because a small percentage have defective filters that could cause temporary discomfort to smokers ... The defect is attributable to a material purchased from an outside vendor and used in manufacturing filters. The material, a plasticizer, was contaminated at the vendor's facility. The contaminant triggered a reaction that formed a substance known as methyl isothiocyanate (MITC) in the filter. Cigarettes made with the defective filters may give off a noticeable odor or have a metallic or other off-taste. Continued use of the affected product could result in temporary discomfort, including eye, nose and throat irritation, dizziness, coughing and wheezing. Pregnant women and persons suffering from respiratory conditions should avoid exposure to MITC.”

James J Morgan, president and chief executive officer, Philip Morris USA, in a press statement issued on 26 May 1995.

“Hoechst has thoroughly reviewed and re-tested our plasticizer manufacturing process, the specific product in question and the con-

tainers used to transport it. The results show that all processes and products were, and continue to be, within specification. Furthermore, Hoechst Celanese has found nothing to indicate that the company's products or processes could have contributed to the problem that Philip Morris has reported.”

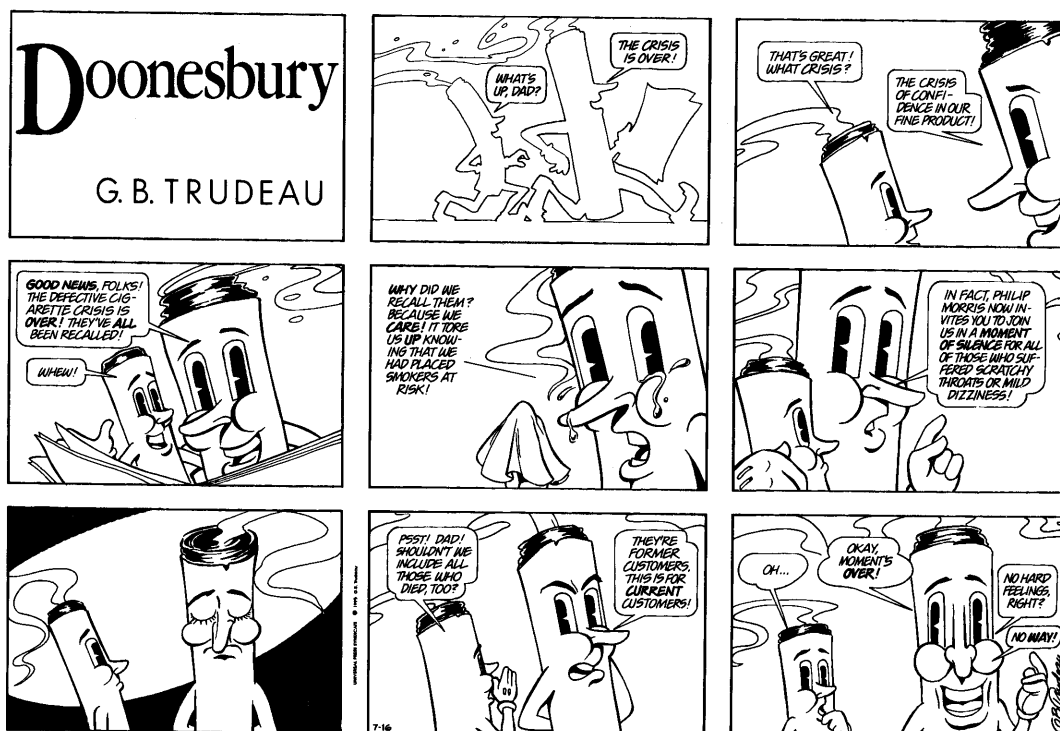
Statement by Philip Morris' filter supplier Hoechst Celanese Corporation (Somerville, New Jersey), a subsidiary of the German company Hoechst AG, as quoted in the Wall Street Journal, 30 May 1995.

Cigarettes bought before May 16 “are fine”.
Dr Richard A Carchman, director of scientific affairs, Philip Morris, as quoted in the New York Times, 27 May 1995.

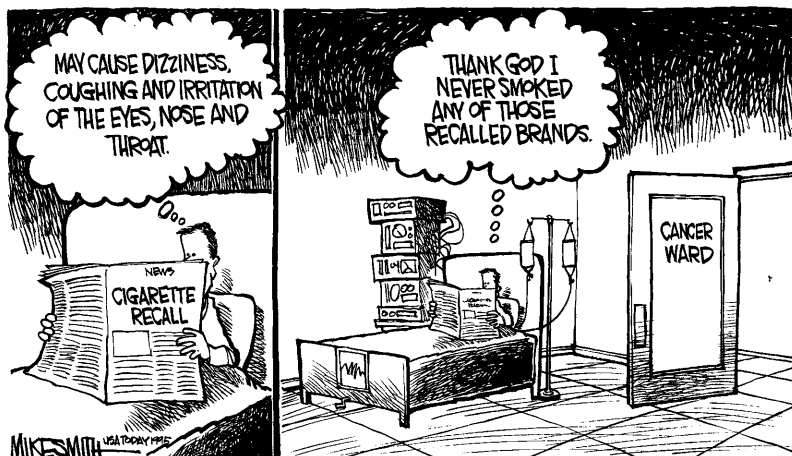
“The nose can smell things you can't measure on a machine.”

Dr Richard A Carchman, director of scientific affairs, Philip Morris, explaining how a production worker detected contamination of cigarette filters, as quoted in the Chicago Tribune, 5 June 1995.

“We would all love that Eureka! moment. Science is not like a push button process.”
David Laufer, director of public affairs for Philip Morris,



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By Mike Smith of the Las Vegas Sun, reprinted with permission

commenting on the company's investigation to determine the cause of the contamination, as quoted in the Charlotte (North Carolina) Observer, 2 June 1995.

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"Our sales force is making it clear to retailers that our brands are not part of the recall."

Maura Ellis, spokeswoman for R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Company, who noted that her company was enjoying an increase in sales and orders in the days following its competitor's recall (as quoted in the New York Times, 31 May 1995).

The smokers

"I've never met a cigarette that didn't make me do that anyway. I thought that's what they were for."

Chris Edwards, a bond trader in Albany, New York, who smokes Marlboro Lights, commenting on the symptoms reported to be caused by the contaminated cigarettes (as quoted by the Associated Press, 30 May 1995).

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"I don't get dizzy and they don't smell funny. They taste the same as they always do - bad."

Gus Schiavulli, a 65 year old smoker from Cranston, Rhode Island, as quoted by the Associated Press, 31 May 1995.

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"I mean, I'm already killing myself by smoking, so I don't need anything extra. I had felt queasy for a couple of days and I've been trying to quit and I thought I was getting symptoms from trying to quit."

Cinda Tekolu of Atlanta, Georgia, as she substituted a package of Newport (made by Lorillard) for her usual Benson & Hedges (recalled by Philip Morris) (as quoted in the New York Times, 2 June 1995).

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"So that's what's wrong with my brain. But I probably won't quit, and neither will anyone else. Look at Tylenol, and I'm still using that."

Bill Moller of Florence, New Jersey, a Marlboro Lights smoker who said he had not heard about the recall (as quoted by the New York Times, 2 June 1995).

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"Product recalls happen. What are you going to do? At least it's not cyanide."

Marikay McKeon, a 23 year old Camel smoker who works in New York, as quoted in USA Today, 31 May 1995, pp 1A-2A.

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"I don't believe there's anything wrong.

Maybe I'll get a more intense high. And besides, I usually wheeze and my eyes water when I smoke anyway."

Donnell Moore, 22, of Detroit, Michigan, as he bought a pack of Marlboro regulars (as quoted by the Associated Press, 31 May 1995).

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"If you're a smoker, you'll smoke anything."

Mike Burn, a bar owner in Stamford, Connecticut, who switched from Marlboro to Marlboro Medium, which was not recalled (as quoted by the Associated Press, 30 May 1995).

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"It didn't sound like a big deal. I assume the ones I bought are safe."

Christine Santos, a 22 year old smoker from Providence, Rhode Island, as quoted by the Associated Press, 30 May 1995.

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"I don't care about some filter crap. I'm not paranoid. Plus, they said it wasn't lethal, whatever it was."

Richard Thomas, of Montclair, New Jersey, as quoted by the New York Daily News, 1 June 1995.

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"I collect the Marlboro coupons and it takes a million just to get a T shirt. What am I supposed to do, quit? Well, I heard it wasn't that bad anyway."

Michael Doo, of New York City, as quoted by the New York Daily News, 1 June 1995.

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"If my brand is affected, I will probably switch brands - cigarettes are dangerous enough, I don't want to add to it."

Shaldya Collins, a 20 year old resident of Brooklyn, New York, as quoted in New York Newsday, 30 May 1995.

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"If this doesn't stop, people are going to get sick off cigarettes. The stores should be responsible for cleaning the shelves. They are taking advantage of people who smoke."

Rose Vegh, resident of Newport News, Virginia, who developed numbness of the tongue and a sore mouth and throat after smoking a Basic 100 cigarette at the time of the recall (as quoted in the Newport News Daily Press, 31 May 1995).

The vendors

"They said they wanted their cigarettes. I'm not going to deny a customer their cigarettes. Just because they're recalling them doesn't mean I have to recall them."

Nick Nadeau, general manager of 1st Grand Avenue Liquor, as quoted in the St Paul (Minnesota) Pioneer Press, 1 June 1995, p 1A.

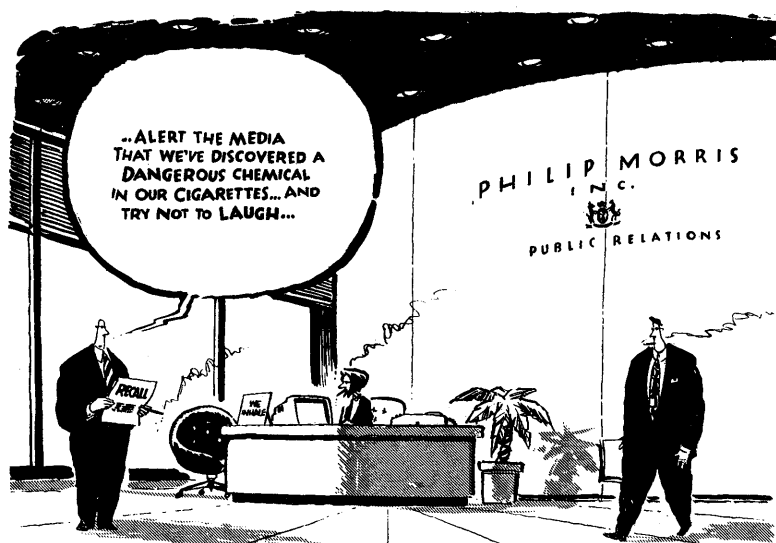
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"It's going to be bad for everybody. We will be very disappointed in losing the sales... but most importantly, we don't want to cause any harm to our customers."

Derone McNeill, company manager for JR Tobacco Discount Outlet in Statesville, North Carolina, one of the country's leading cigarette sellers, as quoted in the Charlotte (North Carolina) Observer, 27 May 1995.

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"My regular customers stopped smoking one



By Jack Ohman of the Portland (Oregon) Oregonian, reprinted by permission of Tribune Medical Services

pack a day to half a pack. I lost a lot of business because people stop smoking due to the fact that they can get sick."

Patel Amdala, who operates a newsstand in New York City, as quoted by the New York Daily News, 1 June 1995.

The media

"How do you satirize that story? Is there anyone over the age of 6 who didn't start laughing hysterically at the prospect of a cigarette being recalled to make sure it was ... safe?"

ABC correspondent Jeff Greenfield, writing in the San Jose Mercury News, 4 June 1995.

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"(R)ecalling cigarettes for those symptoms makes about as much sense as recalling Rice Krispies because they snap, crackle and pop. Or recalling baked beans because they produce flatulence."

Joe Soucheray, a columnist with the St Paul (Minnesota) Pioneer Press, in his column published in the 2 June 1995 edition of that newspaper, p 1B.

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"Now they're telling us the filters are made with stuff that can kill garden slugs? Dial 1-800-SUE 'EM. Next stop, bankruptcy court."

Bj Phillips, columnist for the Philadelphia Inquirer, in his column published in the Charlotte Observer, 3 June 1995, p 15A.

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"From now on they'll have to change the wording of the warning on the cigarette pack. Instead of saying, 'Cigarette smoking may be dangerous to your health,' they'll have to say, 'Cigarette smoking may be really dangerous to your health.'"

Satirist Stan Freberg, who refused tobacco accounts when he ran an advertising agency, as quoted in the Los Angeles Times, 29 May 1995.

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"In 1990, medical researchers found, 418 690 people died of smoking related illness. Imagine if the entire population of a city the size of, oh, Atlanta, dropped dead over the course of a year, coughing, spitting, hacking. They'd make

a TV movie about it, right? 'Ebola, The Cigarette.'"

David Nyhan, writing in the Boston Globe, 2 June 1995, p 19.

Investment analysts and business interests

"They (Philip Morris) handled it responsibly, put out the fire very quickly, and have been given good marks by Wall Street for it."

Barry Ziegler, analyst with AG Edwards, as quoted in the Charlotte Observer, 3 June 1995, p 15A.

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"Philip Morris had a strong crisis-management team with good plans, good advice and good execution. Any short term loss of market share they suffer will probably come back."

S Leigh Ferst, analyst at SG Warburg & Company, which is noted for its financial research on the cigarette industry (as quoted in the Chicago Tribune, 7 June 1995).

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"They'll come back roaring again. As a consumer analyst, I would say that Marlboro franchise is one of the strongest, if not the strongest (brand). Consumer loyalty is extremely high."

Lawrence Adelman, analyst with Dean Witter Reynolds Inc, as quoted by the Dow Jones News, 30 May 1995.

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"The \$100 million is a drop in the bucket for them but I still think it's a huge embarrassment. There is no excuse for this kind of thing happening at one of the world's largest consumer products corporation ... I'm sure a few heads will roll."

Roy D Burry, a tobacco analyst for Oppenheimer and Company, commenting on the costs of the recall incurred by Philip Morris (as quoted by the Associated Press, 30 May 1995, and the New York Times, 31 May 1995).

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"It's almost like a cosmic joke. The day to day hazards of using the product are far worse than these filter contaminants."

Ian Mitroff, director of the Center for Crisis Management, University of Southern California, as quoted in USA Today, 31 May 1995, pp 1A-2A.

The health community

"If it tastes funny, or smells funny ... then obviously, don't smoke any more."

Ruddy Rose, clinical toxicologist at the Carolina Poison Center in Charlotte, North Carolina, as quoted in the Charlotte Observer, 27 May 1995.

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"A company that makes products that are lethal and responsible for hundreds of thousands of deaths in the United States a year seems suddenly to have taken an interest in a little dizziness. That's what most of us that get around smoking experience anyway."

Dr Alan Blum, as quoted by the Associated Press, 26 May 1995.

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"Recalling a cigarette because it contains a smelly chemical is like recalling the Titanic because there are splinters in the railing."

John Banzhaf, executive director, Action on Smoking and



By Kevin Siers of the Charlotte (North Carolina) Observer, reprinted with permission

Health (Washington, DC), as quoted in USA Today, 31 May 1995, pp 1A-2A.

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"Forget about contaminated plasticizers. The smoke emitted by the average cigarette contains—to name just a few discomfiting chemicals: ammonia (the toilet bowl cleaner); carbon monoxide (car exhaust fumes); arsenic and cyanide (the favored poisons of murder mysteries); acetone (nail polish remover); methane (swamp gas); and formaldehyde (the dead frog preservative). Add addictive levels of nicotine and hefty doses of tar and cigarettes already deliver a lethal mixture."

Cliff Douglas, president of Tobacco Control Law and Policy Consultancy (Evanston, Illinois), in a letter published in USA Today, 1 June 1995.

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"When Philip Morris recalls its cigarettes because of the tobacco in them, and the more than 4000 chemicals found in cigarette smoke—as opposed to one chemical in its cigarette filters—that will really be a story."

Dr Robert H Anderson of Morgantown, West Virginia, in a letter published in USA Today, 1 June 1995.

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This situation "reemphasizes once again the critical need for the FDA [US Food and Drug Administration] to assert jurisdiction over tobacco products... In this incident it was only because of the odor that the contamination was detected. What would have been the result if there were no odor?"

The Coalition on Smoking OR Health (representing the American Cancer Society, the American Heart Association, and the American Lung Association), in a letter to Dr David Kessler, Commissioner of the FDA, as quoted in the Washington Post, 31 May 1995.

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"In products [liability] cases, it is always difficult to establish a reasonable standard of care. Here they've created a baseline... It highlights that this is an industry that cares very deeply about what's in their product, that

knows what's in their product, and therefore is responsible for it."

Richard Daynard, head of the Tobacco Products Liability Project at Northeastern University School of Law in Boston, commenting on the implications of the Philip Morris recall on litigation against the company (as quoted in the Wall Street Journal, 5 June 1995, p B8).

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"(I don't) see how you can add plasticizer onto pure cellulose acetate and generate MITC... I postulate that MITC is found in cigarette tobacco. It would be reasonable to assume that an error in the application of MITC by the tobacco farmer may give rise to tobacco having relatively high levels of this pesticide."

Dr John Pauly, an immunologist at Buffalo's Roswell Park Cancer Institute, who has done extensive research on cigarette filters (as quoted in the Wall Street Journal, 31 May and 1 June 1995). A spokesman for Philip Morris said that MITC hasn't been used in tobacco pesticides since 1992, and when it was used, he said, it decomposed before crops were planted and left no traces in the soil (Richmond (Virginia) Times-Dispatch, 3 June 1995).

The industry – closing remarks (and a few reactions)

"In our desire to take prompt and responsible action to address this problem, we erred in suggesting that the MITC was derived from the plasticizer and could cause temporary discomfort. Based on our subsequent investigation, we now know that our comments about MITC were inaccurate, and we apologize for any confusion that may have resulted. However, we believe that our customers appreciated our over-abundance of caution..."

[O]ur scientists have learned that MITC is a natural breakdown product of thione, a packaging preservative approved by the FDA for many years for use in paperboard production."

James J Morgan, president and chief executive officer, Philip Morris USA, in a press statement issued on 20 June 1995.

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"Minute traces of... (MITC) may derive from thione. There are no health risks associated with these tiny trace amounts. Because Westvaco wishes to eliminate any possible lingering concern as a result of Philip Morris' initial comments made on May 26, we have discontinued the use of thione... Even though there are no safety concerns, this action reflects Westvaco's longstanding commitment to consumer and customer satisfaction and high quality products. Since this is not a matter of product safety, we can assure all of our customers that they may safely use any inventories of our present products that are either already in our pipelines or theirs."

Jack A Hammond, senior vice president of Westvaco Corporation (New York, New York), Philip Morris USA's principal supplier of bleached board packaging for cigarettes, in a statement on the PRNewswire, 20 June 1995.

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"So let's see: it's not the filters, it's not the packaging, and the cigarettes inside, of course, continue to be harmless. What's the problem?"

Editorial, New York Times, 25 June 1995, section 3, p 2.

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"We have an extremely cordial relationship with Philip Morris, and [a lawsuit] is the furthest thing from our minds. We wouldn't even consider it."

Spokeswoman for Hoechst, when asked if the company planned any legal action against Philip Morris (PM), which had blamed and then exonerated Hoechst for PM's contamination problem (as quoted in the Wall Street Journal, 21 June 1995).

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"Philip Morris did, indeed, look good at the start of the recall. The company was quick, thorough and seemingly surgical in its ability to stop trouble in its tracks. It declared that it stands behind its products and cares about its customers. The company, with its record of charitable activities, portrayed the recall as another do-good act: the same guys who sponsor modern art wouldn't let you smoke a bad cigarette..."

But let's examine the recall more closely... Where the company most egregiously mis-

stepped was in blaming an outside supplier instead of accepting full responsibility for the contamination. Then, gratuitously, it warned pregnant women and people with respiratory conditions away from their contaminated products - while the whole world knows that neither group should be smoking to begin with.

Laying off the blame came back to haunt Philip Morris last week when it had to correct itself on the cause of the contamination. But in making that correction it only spread the blame beyond Hoechst to yet another outside supplier, Westvaco... (T)he point is that Philip Morris manufactured the cigarettes and is entirely accountable for them. If an automobile company produced a car whose wheels fell off because an outside supplier used bad steel, the car maker would never try to duck responsibility for the vehicle's integrity."

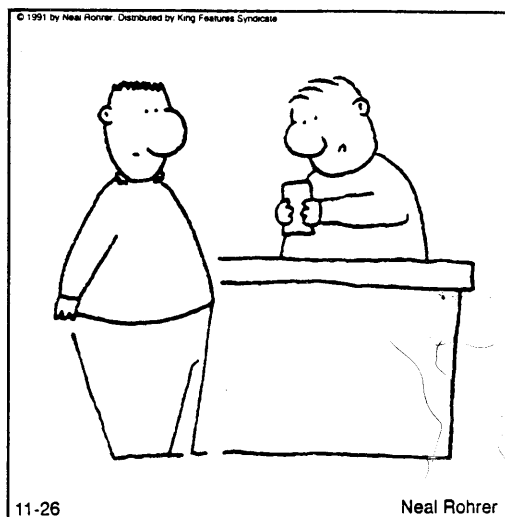
Businessman and professor Gerald C Meyers, writing in the New York Times, 25 June 1995, section 3, p 13.

Faculty risk assessment in action

A patient told me about a round of golf with a close friend. As he waited for his companion to play, my patient lit a cigarette and took a puff. When it came his turn, he put the smoke down on the fender of the golf cart. Upon returning to the cart to take another drag, he found that the cigarette had rolled off the cart and onto the grass. Without giving it a thought, he stamped it out. Expressing some surprise at this, his friend asked, "You had just lit it. Why didn't you pick it up?" My patient replied, "They spray."

John Slade
Robert Wood Johnson Medical School
St Peter's Medical Center
New Brunswick, New Jersey, USA

The New Breed



My gosh... the seal is broken. I'll get you another pack of cigarettes just to be safe.
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